IN THE SPECIFICATION

Please amend Page 9, Line 17 to Page 10, Line 11 as follows:

In accordance with one aspect of the most preferred embodiment, stiffening member 150 actually serves a dual purpose. In addition to enhancing overall structural integrity of column wall 44, stiffening member 150 also acts to decouple dispensing region from storage region 138. In general, a weight of product containers [[49]] 61 arranged in storage region 138 has a tendency to cause planar surface 120 to slightly deform and lower edge 117 to bow inward. The inward bowing of lower edge 117 could cause product containers [[49]] 61 to become trapped or jammed in dispensing region 140, thereby interfering with or otherwise causing inconsistencies in the overall vend operation. In order to prevent the transferring of a bow force from storage region 138 into dispensing region 140, stiffening member 150 is arranged at bottom portion 132 of ~~planer~~ planar surface 120. That is, as stiffening member 150 includes a fore-to-aft extending, elongated narrow slot, dispensing region 140 is loosely connected to storage region 138 through narrow webs of material as indicated at 154 and [[154]] 155 in Figure 5. In this manner, any bow forces developed in storage region 138 can only be transferred through web portions 154-155 into dispensing region 140. The minimal transfer zones [[aids]] aid in assuring that dispensing region 140 will be held straight even when storage region 138 shifts or floats. This decoupling of the bow forces substantially reduces vend errors resulting from product containers 61 being out of alignment.

Please amend Page 10, Line 12 to Page 11, Line 2 as follows:

Before product containers 61 pass from storage region 138 into dispensing region 140, the product containers 61 must be properly aligned or oriented in order to enter into a cradle or oscillator (not shown). To address this requirement in accordance with the present invention, column wall 44 is provided with a louver structure or alignment element 160 having a flange or guide surface 165. Alignment member 160, and by extension guide surface 165, is integrally formed from ~~planer~~ planar surface 120. More specifically, guide surface 165 is preferably stamped from planar surface 1230 and formed to project outward from column wall 44. Guide surface 165 causes each product container 61 to move and shift away from planar surface 120 of column wall 44 and align within stack area 53 for proper dispensing purposes. That is, product containers 61 travel downward in stack area 53 through dispensing operations. As best seen in Figure 9, during a lowermost portion of that downward travel, the product containers 61 will contact guide surface 165 and shift laterally away from column wall 44 for subsequent dispensing. In this manner, each product container 61 is properly positioned in a pre-vend position prior to entering the cradle or oscillator (not shown).

Please amend Page 11, Line 14 to Page 12, Line 10 as follows:

Although described with reference to a preferred embodiment of the present invention, it should be readily apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art that various changes and/or modifications can be made to the invention without departing from the spirit thereof. For instance, the overall number of stiffening elements can be varied depending on the particular construction of the vending machine. As one example, Figure 10 depicts a column wall 44a constructed in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. Of particular interest, it should be noted that column wall 44a includes an additional upper stiffening element 170. Also, stiffening element 147 of the Figure 5 embodiment has been replaced by a stiffener structure 172. In the embodiment shown, stiffening structure 172 interconnects stiffening elements 146 and [[147]] 148 and takes the form of a star or asterisk. However, other stiffener configurations, such as an X or H arrangement, could also be employed. This arrangement has been found to provide enhanced overall strength to storage region 138, thereby minimizing the potential bowing. Furthermore, the overall size and structure of alignment element 160 and guide surface 165 of the Figure 5 embodiment can be reduced to that shown at 160' and 165'. Finally, notches, such as those indicated at 180 and 181, can be employed for added strength. While the present invention has been described with respect to a single stack column wall, it should be apparent that the present invention would be equally acceptable in forming multi-stack column walls. In general, the invention is only intended to be limited to the scope of the following claims.